Russian Short Stories

Easter Day

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22–28 minutes Translated from Russian by Rosa Savary Graham and Stephen Graham 4,167 words Published 1916

On his way from Petersburg to the Crimea Colonel Voznitsin purposely broke his journey at Moscow, where his childhood and youth had been spent, and stayed there two days. It is said that some animals when they feel that they are about to die go round to all their favourite and familiar haunts, taking leave of them, as it were. Voznitsin was not threatened by the near approach of death; at forty years of age he was still strong and well-preserved. But in his tastes and feelings and in his relations with the world he had reached the point from which life slips almost imperceptibly into old age. He had begun to narrow the circle of his enjoyments and pleasures; a habit of retrospection and of sceptical suspicion was manifest in his behaviour; his dumb, unconscious, animal love of Nature had become less and was giving place to a more refined appreciation of the shades of beauty; he was no longer agitated and disturbed by the adorable loveliness of women, but chiefly—and this was the first sign of spiritual blight—he began to think about his own death. Formerly he had thought about it in a careless and transient fashion—sooner or later death would come, not to him personally, but to some other, someone of the name of Voznitsin. But now he thought of it with a grievous,

sharp, cruel, unwavering, merciless clearness, so that at nights his heart beat in terror and his blood ran cold. It was this feeling which had impelled him to visit once more those places familiar to his youth, to live over again in memory those dear, painfully sweet recollections of his childhood, overshadowed with a poetical sadness, to wound his soul once more with the sweet grief of recalling that which was forever past—the irrevocable purity and clearness of his first impressions of life.

And so he did. He stayed two days in Moscow, returning to his old haunts. He went to see the boardinghouse where once he had lived for six years in the charge of his form mistress, being educated under the Froebelian system. Everything there was altered and reconstituted; the boys' department no longer existed, but in the girls' classrooms there was still the pleasant and alluring smell of freshly varnished tables and stools; there was still the marvellous mixture of odours in the dining-room, with a special smell of the apples which now, as then, the scholars hid in their private cupboards. He visited his old military school, and went into the private chapel where as a cadet he used to serve at the altar, swinging the censer and coming out in his surplice with a candle at the reading of the Gospel, but also stealing the wax candle-ends, drinking the wine after Communion, and sometimes making grimaces at the funny deacon and sending him into fits of laughter, so that once he was solemnly sent away from the altar by the priest, a magnificent and plump greybeard, strikingly like the picture of the God of Sabaoth behind the altar. He went along all the old streets, and purposely lingered in front of the houses where

first of all had come to him the naive and childish languishments of love; he went into the courtyards and up the staircases, hardly recognising any of them, so much alteration and rebuilding had taken place in the quarter of a century of his absence. And he noticed with irritation and surprise that his staled and life-wearied soul remained cold and unmoved, and did not reflect in itself the old familiar grief for the past, that gentle grief, so bright, so calm, reflective and submissive.

"Yes, yes, yes—it's old age," he repeated to himself, nodding his head sadly.... "Old age, old age, old age.... It can't be helped...."

After he left Moscow he was kept in Kiev for a whole day on business, and only arrived at Odessa at the beginning of Holy Week. But it had been bad weather for some days, and Voznitsin, who was a very bad sailor, could not make up his mind to embark. It was only on the morning of Easter Eve that the weather became fine and the sea calm.

At six o'clock in the evening the steamer Grand Duke Alexis left the harbour. Voznitsin had no one to see him off, for which he was thankful. He had no patience with the somewhat hypocritical and always difficult comedy of farewell, when God knows why one stands a full half-hour at the side of the boat and looks down upon the people standing on the pier, smiling constrained smiles, throwing kisses, calling out from time to time in a theatrical tone foolish and meaningless phrases for the benefit of the bystanders, till at last, with a sigh of relief, one feels the steamer begin slowly and heavily to move away.

There were very few passengers on board, and the majority of them were third-class people. In the first-class there were only

two others besides himself: a lady and her daughter, as the steward informed him. “That’s good,” thought he to himself.

Everything promised a smooth and easy voyage. His cabin was excellent, large and well lighted, with two divans and no upper berths at all. The sea, though gently tossing, grew gradually calmer, and the ship did not roll. At sunset, however, there was a fresh breeze on deck.

Voznitsin slept that night with open windows, and more soundly than he had slept for many months, perhaps for a year past. When the boat arrived at Eupatoria he was awakened by the noise of the cranes and by the running of the sailors on the deck. He got up, dressed quickly, ordered a glass of tea, and went above.

The steamer was at anchor in a half-transparent mist of a milky rose tint, pierced by the golden rays of the rising sun. Scarcely noticeable in the distance, the flat shore lay glimmering. The sea was gently lapping the steamer’s sides. There was a marvellous odour of fish, pitch and seaweed. From a barge alongside they were lading packages and bales. The captain’s directions rang out clearly in the pure air of morning: “Maina, véra, véra po malu, stop!”

When the barge had gone off and the steamer began to move again, Voznitsin went down into the dining saloon. A strange sight met his gaze. The tables were placed flat against the walls of the long room and were decorated with gay flowers and covered with Easter fare. There were lambs roasted whole, and turkeys, with their long necks supported by unseen rods and wire, raised their foolish heads on high. Their thin necks were

bent info the form of an interrogation mark, and they trembled and shook with every movement of the steamer. They might have been strange antediluvian beasts, like the brontozauri or ichthauri one sees in pictures, lying there upon the large dishes, their legs bent under them, their heads on their twisted necks looking around with a comical and cautious wariness. The clear sunlight streamed through the portholes and made golden circles of light on the tablecloths, transforming the colours of the Easter eggs into purple and sapphire, and making the flowers—hyacinths, pansies, tulips, violets, wallflowers, forget-me-nots—glow with living fire.

The other first-class passenger also came down for tea. Voznitsin threw a passing glance at her. She was neither young nor beautiful, but she had a tall, well-preserved, rather stout figure, and was well and simply dressed in an ample light-coloured cloak with silk collar and cuffs. Her head was covered with a light-blue, semitransparent gauze scarf. She drank her tea and read a book at the same time, a French book Voznitsin judged by its small compact shape and pale yellow cover.

There was something strangely and remotely familiar about her, not so much in her face as in the turn of her neck and the lift of her eyebrows when she cast an answering glance at him. But this unconscious impression was soon dispersed and forgotten.

The heat of the saloon soon sent the passengers on deck, and they sat down on the seats on the sheltered side of the boat. The lady continued to read, though she often let her book fall on to her knee while she gazed upon the sea, on the dolphins

sporting there, on the distant cliffs of the shore, purple in colour or covered with a scant verdure.

Voznitsin began to pace up and down the deck, turning when he reached the cabin. Once, as he passed the lady, she looked up at him attentively with a kind of questioning curiosity, and once more it seemed to him that he had met her before somewhere. Little by little this insistent feeling began to disquiet him, and he felt that the lady was experiencing the same feelings. But try as he would he could not remember meeting her before.

Suddenly, passing her for the twentieth time, he almost involuntarily stopped in front of her, saluted in military fashion, and lightly clicking his spurs together said:

“Pardon my boldness … but I can’t get rid of a feeling that I know you, or rather that long ago I used to know you.”

She was quite a plain woman, of blonde almost red colouring, grey hair—though this was only noticeable at a near view owing to its original light colour—pale eyelashes over blue eyes, and a faded freckled face. Her mouth only seemed fresh, being full and rosy, with beautifully curved lips.

“And I also,” said she. “Just fancy, I’ve been sitting here and wondering where we could have met. My name is Lvova—does that remind you of anything?”

“I’m sorry to say it doesn’t,” answered he, “but my name is Voznitsin.”

The lady’s eyes gleamed suddenly with a gay and familiar smile, and Voznitsin saw that she knew him at once.

“Voznitsin, Kolya Voznitsin,” she cried joyfully, holding out her hand to him. “Is it possible I didn’t recognise you? Lvova, of course, is my married name.… But no, no, you will remember me in time.… Think: Moscow, Borisoglebsky Street, the house belonging to the church.… Well? Don’t you remember your school chum, Arkasha Yurlof…?”

Voznitsin’s hand trembled as he pressed hers. A flash of memory enlightened him.

“Well, I never!… It can’t be Lenotchka? I beg your pardon, Elena… Elena.…”

“Elena Vladimirovna,” she put in. “You’ve forgotten.… But you, Kolya, you’re just the same Kolya, awkward, shy, touchy Kolya. How strange for us to meet like this! Do sit down.… How glad I am.…”

“Yes,” muttered Voznitsin, “the world is really so small that everyone must of necessity meet everyone else”—a by no means original thought. “But tell me all that has happened. How is Arkasha—and Alexandra Millievna—and Oletchka?”

At school Voznitsin had only been intimate with one of his companions—Arkasha Yurlof. Every Sunday he had leave he used to visit the family, and at Easter and Christmas-time he had sometimes spent his holidays with them. Before the time came for them to go to college, Arkasha had fallen ill and had been ordered away into the country. And from that time Voznitsin had lost sight of him. Many years ago he had heard by chance that Lenotchka had been betrothed to an officer having the unusual surname of Jenishek, who had done a thing

at once foolish and unexpected—shot himself.

“Arkasha died at our country house in 1890,” answered the lady, “of cancer. And mother only lived a year after. Oletchka took her medical degree and is now a doctor in the Serdobsky district—before that she was assistant in our village of Jemakino. She has never wished to marry, though she’s had many good offers. I’ve been married twenty years,” said she, a gleam of a smile on her compressed lips. “I’m quite an old woman.… My husband has an estate in the country, and is a member of the Provincial Council. He hasn’t received many honours, but he’s an honest fellow and a good husband, is not a drunkard, neither plays cards nor runs after women, as others do.… God be praised for that!…”

“Do you remember, Elena Vladimirovna, how I was in love with you at one time?” Voznitsin broke in suddenly.

She smiled, and her face at once wore a look of youth. Voznitsin saw for a moment the gleam of the gold stopping in her teeth.

“Foolishness!… Just lad’s love.… But you weren’t in love with me at all; you fell in love with the Sinyelnikofs, all four of them, one after the other. When the eldest girl married you placed your heart at the feet of the next sister, and so on.”

“Ah-ha! You were just a little jealous, eh?” remarked Voznitsin with jocular self-satisfaction.

“Oh, not at all!… You were like Arkasha’s brother.… Afterwards, later, when you were about seventeen perhaps, I was a little vexed to think you had changed towards me.… You

know, its ridiculous, but girls have hearts like women. We may not love a silent adorer, but we are jealous if he pays attentions to others. … But that's all nonsense. Tell me more about yourself, where you live, and what you do."

He told her of his life—at college, in the army, about the war, and his present position. No, he had never married—at first he had feared poverty and the responsibility of a family, and now it was too late. He had had flirtations, of course, and even some serious romances.

The conversation ceased after a while, and they sat silent, looking at one another with tender, tear-dimmed eyes. In Voznitsin's memory the long past of thirty years ago came swiftly again before him. He had known Lenotchka when he was eleven years old. She had been a naughty, fidgetty sort of girl, fond of telling tales and liking to make trouble. Her face was covered with freckles, she had long arms and legs, pale eyelashes, and disorderly red hair hanging about her face in long wisps. Her sister Oletchka was different; she had always kept apart, and behaved like a sensible girl. On holidays they all went together to dances at the Assembly Rooms, to the theatre, the circus, to the skating rink. They got up Christmas parties and children's plays together; they coloured eggs at Easter and dressed up at Christmas. They quarrelled and carried on together like young puppies.

There were three years of that. Lenotchka used to go away every summer with her people to their country house at Jemakino, and that year, when she returned to Moscow in the autumn, Voznitsin opened both eyes and mouth in

astonishment. She was changed; you couldn't say that she was beautiful, but there was something in her face more wonderful than actual beauty, a rosy radiant blossoming of the feminine being in her. It is so sometimes. God knows how the miracle takes place, but in a few weeks, an awkward, undersized, gawky schoolgirl will develop suddenly into a charming maiden. Lenotchka's face still kept her summer sunburn, under which her ardent young blood flowed gaily, her shoulders had filled out, her figure rounded itself, and her soft breasts had a firm outline—all her body had become willowy, graceful, gracious.

And their relations towards one another had changed also. They became different after one Saturday evening when the two of them, frolicking together before church service in a dimly lighted room, began to wrestle together and fight. The windows were wide open, and from the garden came the clear freshness of autumn and a slight winey odour of fallen leaves, and slowly one after another rang out the sounds of the church bells.

They struggled together; their arms were round each other so that their bodies were pressed closely together and they were breathing in each other's faces. Suddenly Lenotchka, her face flaming crimson even in the darkening twilight, her eyes dilated, began to whisper angrily and confusedly:

"Let me go … let go. … I don't want to … ," adding with a malicious gleam in her wet eyes: "Nasty, horrid boy."

The nasty, horrid boy released her and stood there, awkwardly stretching out his trembling arms. His legs trembled also, and his forehead was wet with a sudden perspiration. He had just now felt in his arms the slender responsive waist of a woman,

broadening out so wonderfully to the rounded hips; he had felt on his bosom the pliant yielding contact of her firm, high, girlish breasts and breathed the perfume of her body—that pleasant intoxicating scent of opening poplar buds and young shoots of black-currant bushes which one smells on a clear damp evening of spring after a slight shower, when the sky and the rain-pools flame with crimson and the may beetles hum in the air.

Thus began for Voznitsin that year of love languishment, of bitter passionate dreams, of secret and solitary tears. He became wild, unsociable, rude and awkward in consequence of his torturing shyness; he was always knocking over chairs and catching his clothes on the furniture, upsetting the tea-table with all the cups and saucers—"Our Kolinka's always getting into trouble," said Lenotchka's mother good-naturedly.

Lenotchka laughed at him. But he knew nothing of it, he was continually behind her watching her draw or write or embroider, and looking at the curve of her neck with a strange mixture of happiness and torture, watching her white skin and flowing golden hair, seeing how her brown school-blouse moved with her breathing, becoming large and wrinkling up into little pleats when she drew in her breath, then filling out and becoming tight and elastic and round again. The sight of her girlish wrists and pretty arms, and the scent of opening poplar buds about her, remained with the boy and occupied his thoughts in class, in church, in detention rooms.

In all his notebooks and textbooks Voznitsin drew beautifully-twined initials E and Y, and cut them with a knife on the lid of

his desk in the middle of a pierced and flaming heart. The girl, with her woman's instinct, no doubt guessed his silent adoration, but in her eyes he was too everyday, too much one of the family. For him she had suddenly been transformed into a blooming, dazzling, fragrant wonder, but in her sight he was still the same impetuous boy as before, with a deep voice and hard rough hands, wearing a tight uniform and wide trousers. She coquetted innocently with her schoolboy friends and with the young son of the priest at the church, and, like a kitten sharpening its claws, she sometimes found it amusing to throw on Voznitsin a swift, burning, cunning glance. But if he in a momentary forgetfulness squeezed her hand too tightly, she would threaten him with a rosy finger and say meaningly:

"Take care, Kolya. I shall tell mother." And Voznitsin would shiver with unfeigned terror.

It was no wonder that Kolya had to spend two years in the sixth form; no wonder either that in the summer he fell in love with the eldest of the Sinyelnikof girls, with whom he had once danced at a party.... But at Easter his full heart of love knew a moment of heavenly blessedness.

On Easter Eve he went with the Yurlofs to Borisoglebsky Church, where Alexandra Millievna had an honoured place, with her own kneeling-mat and soft folding chair. And somehow or other he contrived to come home alone with Lenotchka. The mother and Oletchka stayed for the consecration of the Easter cakes, and Lenotchka, Arkasha and Kolya came out of church together. But Arkasha diplomatically vanished—he disappeared as suddenly as if the earth had

opened and swallowed him up. The two young people found themselves alone.

They went arm in arm through the crowd, their young legs moving easily and swiftly. Both were overcome by the beauty of the night, the joyous hymns, the multitude of lights, the Easter kisses, the smiles and greetings in the church. Outside there was a cheerful crowd of people; the dark and tender sky was full of brightly twinkling stars; the scent of moist young leaves was wafted from gardens, and they, too, were unexpectedly so near to one another they seemed lost together in the crowd, and they were out at an unusually late hour.

Pretending to himself that it was by accident, Voznitsin pressed Lenotchka's elbow to his side, and she answered with a barely noticeable movement in return. He repeated the secret caress, and she again responded. Then in the darkness he felt for her fingertips and gently stroked them, and her hand made no objection, was not snatched away.

And so they came to the gate of the church house. Arkasha had left the little gate open for them. Narrow wooden planks placed over the mud led up to the house between two rows of spreading old lime trees. When the gate closed after them, Voznitsin caught Lenotchka's hand and began to kiss her fingers, so warm, so soft, so full of life.

"Lenotchka, I love you; I love you. …"

He put his arms around her and kissed her in the darkness, somewhere just below her ear. His hat fell off on to the ground, but he did not stop to pick it up. He kissed the girl's cool

cheek, and whispered as in a dream:

“Lenotchka, I love you, I love you. …”

“No, no,” said she in a whisper, and hearing the whisper he sought her lips. “No, no, let me go; let me. …”

Dear lips of hers, half childish, simple, innocent lips. When he kissed her she made no opposition, yet she did not return his kisses; she breathed in a touching manner, quickly, deeply, submissively. Down his cheeks there flowed cool tears, tears of rapture. And when he drew his lips away from hers and looked up into the sky, the stars shining through the lime branches seemed to dance and come towards one another, to meet and swim together in silvery clusters, seen through his flowing tears.

“Lenotchka, I love you. …”

“Let me go. …”

“Lenotchka!”

But suddenly she cried out angrily: “Let me go, you nasty, horrid boy. You’ll see, I’ll tell mother everything; I’ll tell her all about it. Indeed, I will.”

She didn’t say anything to her mother, but after that night she never allowed Voznitsin to be alone with her. And then the summertime came. …

“And do you remember, Elena Vladimirovna, how one beautiful Easter night two young people kissed one another just inside the church-house gate?” asked Voznitsin.

“No, I don’t remember anything. … Nasty, horrid boy,” said the

lady, smiling gently. “But look, here comes my daughter. You must make her acquaintance.”

“Lenotchka, this is Nikolai Ivanitch Voznitsin, my old, old friend. I knew him as a child. And this is my Lenotchka. She’s just exactly the same age as I was on that Easter night. …”

“Big Lenotchka and little Lenotchka,” said Voznitsin.

“No, old Lenotchka and young Lenotchka,” she answered, simply and quietly.

Lenotchka was very much like her mother, but taller and more beautiful than she had been in her youth. Her hair was not red, but the colour of a hazel nut with a brilliant lustre; her dark eyebrows were finely and clearly outlined; her mouth full and sensitive, fresh and beautiful.

The young girl was interested in the floating lightships, and Voznitsin explained their construction and use. Then they talked about stationary lighthouses, the depth of the Black Sea, about divers, about collisions of steamers, and so on. Voznitsin could talk well, and the young girl listened to him with lightly parted lips, never taking her eyes from his face.

And he … the longer he looked at her the more his heart was overcome by a sweet and tender melancholy—sympathy for himself, pleasure in her, in this new Lenotchka, and a quiet thankfulness to the elder one. It was this very feeling for which he had thirsted in Moscow, but clearer, brighter, purified from all self-love.

When the young girl went off to look at the Kherson monastery he took the elder Lenotchka’s hand and kissed it gently.

“Life is wise, and we must submit to her laws,” he said thoughtfully. “But life is beautiful too. It is an eternal rising from the dead. You and I will pass away and vanish out of sight, but from our bodies, from our thoughts and actions, from our minds, our inspiration and our talents, there will arise, as from our ashes, a new Lenotchka and a new Kolya Voznitsin. All is connected, all linked together. I shall depart and yet I shall also remain. But one must love Life and follow her guidance. We are all alive together—the living and the dead.”

He bent down once more to kiss her hand, and she kissed him tenderly on his white-haired brow. They looked at one another, and their eyes were wet with tears; they smiled gently, sadly, tenderly.